

THE MAN AND THE MESSAGE

Some of you will remember the name of Dr. Albert Schweitzer; although it is not the household name now that it was 57 years ago when he won the Nobel Peace Prize. But by any measure he was one of the towering personalities of the 20th century. He was born in 1875 in Alsace-Lorraine, on the border between France and Germany; and he died 90 years later in a remote village in Africa. It is impossible to summarize that remarkable life except to say that he was a theologian, preacher, biblical scholar, a distinguished concert organist, and later a medical doctor.

He studied medicine because even though he was a pastor by training and he wanted to go to Africa as a missionary, he wanted to go as a medical missionary, rather than as an evangelist. He founded a hospital in Gabon in central Africa where he was doctor, surgeon, administrator, pastor of the local congregation and writer of scholarly books. He financed his work in large part by giving organ concerts on occasional forays across Europe, and that also gave him access to wealthy potential donors.

He wrote many books, but his most important one, the one by which he is best remembered, was called, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. The book was Schweitzer's attempt to discover the character and personality of the human Jesus, who walked the rocky paths of Palestine, who proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, who taught and healed, and drew all manner of men and women to himself. And who did those things before the events of his death and resurrection revealed him to the world as God With Us.

Everything we read about Jesus in the Bible was written after those events, -- written by the Gospel writers who knew that he was not just Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus the Christ. All that they say about Jesus is filtered through the hindsight of the resurrection.

It is the same with us. But suppose that we didn't know that Jesus had been crucified, died, buried and rose again. Put yourself in the position of those who knew him only as Jesus of Nazareth, who did not know "the rest of the story." What are the clues to his entirely unique personality? What was the quality -- the vital force -- in his human character that drew people to him in such numbers and such a diversity? What, really, was this man like? And what was he committed to as the purpose of his own very human life?

The Gospel we read today offers some important clues. There are two stories of

Jesus' healing the sick. Both are poignantly tender human encounters; and they involve three entirely different kinds of people: a desperate father, a critically sick daughter, and a hopeless woman.

There is a father, a man of great authority in his community, a man who had access to any available human resource, but coming to Jesus as only a father, desperately fearful for the life of his beloved young daughter. How many parents have known that feeling, perhaps in the night time dimness and muted sounds of some hospital intensive care unit? Jarius, perhaps the most important person in his community, in the depth of his need and in the presence of that mysterious power, surrendered all of his prestige, all of his authority, and became only the helpless parent of a critically sick child.

The other was a woman with a chronic condition that was not only physically distressful but one that made her an outcast among her people. The stories are wrapped together, although we don't know the exact order of the events. There is warm human compassion in them, but there is also a powerful spiritual force. Apparently, people sensed a presence around him that was almost physical in its impact.

Notes Borg

He was a remarkable healer: more healing stories are told about him than about anybody else in the Jewish tradition. He attracted a following, including people who left their previous lives behind, and any sketch of Jesus with a claim to historical credibility, must account for this fact. There must have been something quite compelling about him. He also attracted enemies, especially among the rich and powerful.

According to some of the stories in the gospels, his followers experienced a presence around him that was palpable and contagious. . . . Jesus was both a healer and an exorcist. Modern scholars generally accept that there is a historical core to the healing and exorcism stories, even though we may not be confident that

any particular story is a detailed report of a specific incident. But historically speaking, we can say that Jesus was perceived by his contemporaries and himself as an exorcist who cast demons out of people and as a healer of diseases, and that this was attributed to the power of the Spirit working through him.

(Parable of the good Samaritan). . . Contact with death was a source of major impurity; and the wounded man is described as “half dead,” suggesting that one couldn’t tell whether he was dead without coming close enough to incur impurity if he was. Thus this beloved and often domesticated parable was originally a pointed attack on the purity system and an advocacy of another way: compassion.

The stories of his healings shatter the purity boundaries of his social world. He touched lepers and hemorrhaging women.